

## Aurelian and The Sun: The Use of Sol Invictus as a Tool of Propaganda

The emergence of Sol Invictus in the third century AD has long been a curiosity of classicists, especially the deity's patronage under Aurelian. Aurelian lifted Sol Invictus into a preeminent position in the Roman religious landscape. He built a new temple in Rome and Emesa, created a new college of priests, celebrated games, and even made a new holy day for the deity (Salzman 2017). But why did he promote Sol in such a magnanimous way? Is it a case of personal devotion? While this may be the case, it hardly makes sense for an emperor of the tumultuous third century, in which rival claimants persistently looked to usurp the empire or even fracture from it. Thus, it is better understood that the promotion of Sol was an imperial policy to help legitimize Aurelian, but how did it do this?

Until the last couple of decades, Sol Invictus was held as a Syrian import brought to Rome under the Severan emperor Heliogabalus. This traditional idea has mostly been tossed aside in favor of a more conservative understanding of the deity, tracing its evolution from the Republican Sol. This argument of continuation has been explored in detail in Steve Hijmans' monumental work *Sol: Image and Meaning of the Sun in Roman Art and Religion*. This perspective of evolution is key to correctly identifying Sol's emergence in the third century, especially in the reign of Aurelian. In this paper, by looking at literary, numismatic, and archeological evidence, I argue that Aurelian's patronage of Sol Invictus was an imperial tool to project his legitimacy through a connection to the founder of the empire, Augustus.

Aurelian's patronage of Sol is said to have come into full prominence after the battle of Emesa against the Palmyrene queen Zenobia. The *Historia Augusta* states, "*cumque Aureliani equites fatigati iam paene discederent ac terga darent, subito vi numinis, quod postea est*

*proditum, hortante quadam divina forma per pedites etiam equites restituti sunt*” and “*quare et illic templa fundavit donariis ingentibus positis et Romae Soli templum posuit maiore honorificentia consecratum, ut suo dicemus loco*”(H.A 25.3 & 25.6). This initially signaled to scholars the Syrian connection of the deity; however, this vision and consecration of a new temple in Rome is more convincingly understood as recalling Augustus’ cultivation of Apollo as his personal deity of victory, starting after his defeat of Sextus Pompey. This is further strengthened when contextualizing the Solar aspect of Actium Apollo, which provides the most definite link to Aurelian’s Sol. Apollo’s Solar aspect has become more visible due to Hijman's investigation of the radiate crown, which is depicted as worn by the emperors on coinage starting in the reign of Nero and posthumously given to Augustus himself. His persuasive argument that this represents the victor's crown of the Actium Games provides insight into the ancient understanding of Actium Apollo (Hijman 2024). Actium Apollo is seen as a Solar deity who protects the empire and the emperor himself. Our primary sources, such as Horace in his *Carmen Saeculare*, further grounds this. Actium Apollo, being a solar figure, is a main point in the emergence of Sol in the third century and Aurelians’ patronage of the deity.

Aurelian's effort to legitimize himself and his reign through building on imperial precedent has been acknowledged. However, his patronage of Sol is often seen as merely of personal significance. This undermines the greater context in which Aurelians Sol should be viewed. That in which the promotion of Sol invictus was another tool in solidifying his rule. Augustus likewise vowed to build Apollo a temple in return for martial victory, and consecrated new games in celebration of the deity. This is the precedent from which Aurelian was building, and his portrayal of Sol helps solidify this. Aurelian presents Sol on coinage as a victorious deity with his enemies at his feet. He also declares him as *Conservator Augusti*. This iconography of

the deity clearly links Aurelians Sol to Augustus's presentation of Apollo (Yarza 2018). Through all these different pieces of evidence, a picture of Sol's promotion as a propagandistic tool used by Aurelian to solidify his legitimacy as emperor becomes clearer.

### Bibliography

Hijmans, S. E. *Sol : Image and Meaning of the Sun in Roman Art and Religion*. Leiden ; Brill, 2024.

Salzman, M.R. "Aurelian and the Cult of the Unconquered Sun: the Institutionalization of Christmas, Solar Worship, and Imperial cult." In *expressions of cult in the southern levant in the Greco Roman period. Manifestations and material culture* Edited by O. Tal and z. Weiss, Turnhout: Brepolis, 2017 (37-49)

Yarza, Lorenzo Perez. "APOLLO AS A PRECEDENT TO THE COINAGE OF SOL INVICTUS." *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58, no. 1 (2018): 377+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed October 7, 2025). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1556/068.2018.58.1-4.22>.